



"Pink Flamingos" (1972)
The Battle of Filth
By Howard Hampton

Like Carl Dreyer's "The Passion of Joan of Arc" or Robert Bresson's "The Trail of Joan of Arc," John Waters' "Pink Flamingos" (1972) depicts a visionary's trails, faith, and the ultimate sanctification. But the film, which follows the comic quest of Divine – the name of both the actor and main character, Waters' icon of beatific turpitude – turns the concept of transcendence inside out. Here, Divine's calling is to be acknowledged as "the Filthiest Person Alive," hers is the Church of the Supermarket Tabloid, and her banner flies for deviants of every cracked fetish and persuasion under the midnight sun.

Of course, a Grand Canyon's size chasm separates the Maid(s) of Orleans and a Baltimore slum goddess in Ming the Merciless drag. (Since Bresson bemoaned Dreyer's grotesque buffooneries – a nifty summation of Waters' raison d'être – maybe it's more of a three way gap.) But deep down, when all is said and burned,

aren't John and Divine both just mixed-up demoiselles from the sticks, following their inner voices to a rendezvous with immortality? Doesn't Waters perfectly sum up that shared essence in the sublime Little Richard rave-up he appropriates for Divine in "Pink Flamingos," "The Girl Can't Help It" (title song of the eyeball-popping Jayne Mansfield/Frank Tashlin collaboration he's paying homage to)?

Waters and Divine certainly couldn't help it. Starting from breathtakingly smart-a-stunts like staging a home-movie reenactment of the John F. Kennedy assassination in the short "Eat Your Makeup" (1968) (with Divine, of course, as Jackie Kennedy), Waters assembled a photogenic stock company of dropouts, delinquents, and weirdos. Building an anarchic playpen wallow of his first film, "Mondo Trasho" (1969), and the more cultivated acid-trip finishing school that was "Multiple Maniacs" (1970), by "Pink Flamingos" Waters had developed a viable aesthetic: rattling, spasmodic, and expressively incongruous.

And Divine had blossomed into a mesmerizing screen presence: the voracious alter ego of Harris Glenn Milstead was Liz Taylor at her most domineering crossed with Mansfield, the women of "Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!", and Godzilla. Larger-than-life yet somehow anchored in the little matter-of-fact behaviors of a doting mom and daughter, Divine's performance in "Pink Flamingos" is a whole universe unto itself. Terms like drag and transgression are inadequate to describe her hip-swiveling force field of appetite, narcissism, and mutant tenderness.

In the classic crime-boss – or superhero – iteration of hiding in plain sight behind a fig leaf of normalcy, the Filthiest Person Alive has a double identity: Babs Johnson, proud trailer-mom to scuzzy longhair Crackers (Danny Mills, who here has a love-starved-rabid-puppy quality), caregiver to mother Edie (the incomparably daft Edith Massey, ensconced in a crib as if that were the most natural domestic arrangement in the world), and senior partner to sleaze-glam "companion" Cotton (Mary Vivian Pearce, enthrallingly déclassé).

The highly serviceable plot conventions are pulled from exploitation films (with repeated nods to Herschell Gordon Lewis's "Blood Feast"), trashy serious cinema (the "Baby Doll" playpen and the Tennessee Williams-on-quaaludes dialogue), and the Andy Warhol/Jack Smith/George Kuchar wing of the avant queer underground. Planted in the middle of Maryland's badlands, the titular lawn ornaments in front of the decrepit house trailer represent genteel poverty gone

completely to rot. From the first baleful notes of Link Wray & His Ray Men's rockabilly instrumental "The Swag" – which provides the soundtrack to "Pink Flamingos" amateurish titles, strung over a shot of that solidary trailer – this is gloriously *subunderground* filmmaking. Waters anointed his home/"studio," a shoestring operation the size of a bedazzled dumpster, Dreamland. Dreamland was more than a cheeky name – it was a way of life and badge of commitment. A tribe, a species apart: Mole People as opposed to Art Junkies or Day Hipsters.

The central conflict of "Pink Flamingos" is the rivalry between Divine/Babs's clan and the wondrously horrible Connie and Raymond Marble (Mink Stole and David Lochary), who cover the filth crown like nouveau riche pretenders who think they are owed top billing in the social register. They are uptight offenders who imagine themselves the upper crust of scum – as Peter Blegvad sang, "the crumb de la crumb": they don't just kidnap, torture, and impregnate wayward young women in their suburban basement, they also run an adoption racket and sell the babies to lesbian couples. They are bourgeois degenerates – public-spirited, class-conscience folk who have *standards*.

Stole and Lochary, their freaky hauteur underscored by their respective red and blue hairdos, are marvels of pretentious monstrosity. Neither actor is good in an accepted sense, and both are utterly great: epitomes of a performance style pitched to the sweet spot between actual-inmates-take-over-the-Marat/Sade-asylum and talent night at the *Untamed Youth* reformatory. Stole enunciates words like a prim stun gun. Connie Marble to a rejected applicant: "I guess there's just two kinds of people, Miss Sandstone. My kind of people and a--holes. It's rather obvious which category you fit into. Have a nice day!" Lochary defines deviance upward, issuing pronouncements like a louche Confederate general. Upon setting fire to Divine's home-sweet-home trailer: "The battle of filth has been won!"

"Pink Flamingos" unfolds as a stream of sight gags (such as the delightfully punchy variations on Lochary's exposing himself to "innocent" bystanders), arch monologues (these actors had to memorize reams of lines; they weren't winging it), and strange interludes (the famous "singing a--holes" routine, a prolapse in taste wherein a puckering performer anus-synchs to the Trashmen's "Surfin' Bird"). Music is Waters' secret weapon throughout: deploying songs such as the Nite Hawks' "Chicken Grabber" and Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers' "I'm Not a

Juvenile Delinquent” with real outlaw panache, he pioneered punk sensibility before it got codified.

The key to the film’s *pièce de résistance*, in which Divine scoops up and munches on a couple of petite, freshly deposited dog turds, is the juxtaposition of the image with Patti Page’s rendition of “(How Much Is) That Doggie in the Window.” The most nauseatingly white-bread, widely reviled immediately pre-Elvis pop hit imaginable, the song almost single-handedly called rock and roll into existence by dint of its oppressive wholesomeness. The way the turd scene is tacked on at the end of “Pink Flamingos,” like a coming-attractions trailer for the movie you’ve just witnessed, reinforces the film’s ebullient unholiness. It’s the secret dream response to the entirety of fifties sing-along, sitcom corniness, as piquant as if Waters’ had uncovered and incorporated a stag film of TV supermom Donna Reed or found footage of the Danny Thomas-underneath-the-sex-worker-defecating-on-a-glass-coffee-table legend.

This placement at the end is shrewdly strategic – delivering the proverbial money shot of the true filth that audiences have come for, but at a point when it’s too late to walk out if it proves too much to stomach. It’s the counterculture (or maybe counter-counterculture) version of a William Castle audience-grabbing gimmick, and it definitely sears “Pink Flamingos” in the mind of anyone who sees it. But in a movie dedicated to calibrated gratuitousness, it’s just one hook among a parade of jaw-dropping episodes. Waters isn’t a slave to shock value: sometimes his best effects are achieved by deadpan means and other times by semaphore-signaled acting that wouldn’t be out of place in the time of silents-to-talkies transition. Just as memorable as the ending for me is the poignant moment straight out of “The Trash Menagerie” when Babs confronts her egg-fetishist mama. The exchange’s outrageousness lies in how heartfelt it is, daughter and mother switching domestic roles, Massey’s childlike anxiety pacified by Divine’s maternal reassurance: family as a bow of benevolence tied around a couple of basket cases.

EDIE: Is it true, Babs? If there weren’t any chickens, there wouldn’t be any eggs? Is that true?

BABS: I suppose so, Mama, but there will always be chickens. You can be sure of that.

Vivien Leigh couldn't have delivered those tomorrow-is-another-day lines with any more Oscar-ready, sunny-side-up conviction than Divine masters: a little Old Hollywood feeling slipped into a brazenly profane performance.

Bear in mind that the early seventies were also the time of both prime Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Dušan Makavejev's "WR: Mysteries of the Organism." RW's rough-trade ménage of Jean-Luc Godard and Douglas Sirk effectively intellectualized pulp; WR stands for Wilhelm Reich, and that film aimed for a dialectical (or dialectic-adjacent) montage of Soviet Bloc satire, porn, Warhol, and Reichian psychology. On the other hand, Waters and the Dreamlanders proceeded with slap-happy indifference to the intellectualization of deviance. You don't need special knowledge to appreciate their sordid goofs, just a drive-in mentality and a sick sense. Waters' Creatures from Beneath the Underclass are proud and loud. They're wrestlers from a league of polymorphous perversions who talk shit, gift wrap it, and put it in the mail – even eat it for the sake of good gag – but they don't take it from anybody. Divine virtually announced to the Petra von Kants of the cinema: Honey you can kiss my skid-marked a--.

"Pink Flamingos" burrows into the psyche in a backhanded way that justifies Jones Mekas's hyperbole in a quote featured on the original posters: "Ten times more interesting than "Last Tango in Paris." The advertising itself became part of the phenomenon. Reproduced in small black-and-white ads in the "Village Voice" and other alternative weeklies, the image of Divine in that fishtail gown, pointing a pistol, took on a life of its own. Was this an alien with a ray gun? She certainly came to conquer. Still going strong after years on the midnight circuit (in 1975, a fledgling art-satire band named DEVO opened for screening at Kent State), by the late seventies it had been joined by the new mind f-ck on the block, "Eraserhead." A 1979 ad for Los Angeles' Nuart theater frames the respective heads of Divine and Jack Nance as though they were passport photos for entry into the same underworld. You couldn't find two movies further removed from each other tonally, yet in the public unconscious they developed a private affinity. In dreams, "Pink Flamingos" and "Eraserhead" conversed with each other, swapped spit, personality disorders, and sexually transmitted unease.

Looking for deeper meaning or higher purpose in "Pink Flamingos" defeats its purgative function. It's above all funny, but makes "Duck Soup" look like Bresson (*Au hasard Daffy?*). It resonates in ways that are external (poor taste can be

timeless). An enterprising doctoral candidate could make some hay of the pursed demeanors of the Marbles – progressive transgression seeking to “cancel” Divine. But the film comes down to a natural-born smart aleck’s love of incitement, mockery, poking sanctimony with a sharp, rusty rod. In the same way, Waters has often said that Divine’s self-creation wasn’t an expression of gender identity but a way to scare hippies.

“I AM DIVINE!” That irrefutable summation caps the movies’ biggest scene and real denouement: the kangaroo court trial in which Divine turns the tables on the insufferable Raymond and Connie. The Marbles are tied up, cross-examined, and sentenced to die. To add insult to death penalty, they are tarred and feathered first. (The scene, among many, reflects the total commitment of the Dreamlanders to their anti-art: it takes fortitude to put yourself through that.) Divine is judge, prosecutor, and star witness, performing before a group of tabloid reporters. “Let the good people of this country know that they cannot f--k with Divine and get away with it.” She proclaims her new dispensation: “Kill everyone now!... Filth is my politics, filth is my life.” She hands down her verdict: “Connie Marble, you stand convicted of a—holism.” She makes ready to disappear: “The time has come to fight, my children.”

Writing in his 2010 book, “Role Models” about his hero and inspiration Tennessee Williams, Waters says that in the playwright’s work he saw an opening into “a universe filled with special people who didn’t want to be a part of this dreary conformist life that I was told had to join.” As a standard rationale for deviation, this has since become something of its own dreary conformism. But the people in “Pink Flamingos” are more than “special” – they aren’t earning merit badges in marginality, they are honest-to-God marginal. (It says something that the most “conventional” actor may be Cookie Mueller, who gives a splendidly surly “Chelsea Girls” – in-the-chicken-coop vibe.) They really relish the idea of attacking bourgeois norms and rubbing their unmentionables on piety’s every spotless surface. They are mostly fearless – occasionally Waters lets their exaggerations turn into blow-j-b shtick to let us know they don’t mean any harm with these indecent acts – and throw themselves into the moment with happy abandon.

You may not want to go back and be one of them, but a movie like this makes you want to be part of something as unfettered and alive. To be able to say: I was a Dreamlander too. The closest I ever came was falling in love with someone from

Towson, Maryland, their old stomping ground. She'd grown up there, but in 1968, at sixteen, she ran away to Boulder, joined a communal household, and before she was nineteen had managed to marry a schizophrenic pianist. Years after that, when I knew her, she called me late one night after seeing a screening of Marcel Carne's "Les enfants du paradis" and proceeded to recount the entire movie in two transfixing, probably drug-tripping hours. "Pink Flamingos" is the rare movie that can inspire the same kind of delirium. I think: you can get lost in its absurdities and come back to earth wanting to not only tell your friends of the experience but convert them – make them over into "Les enfants du Dreamland."

More prosaically, it give you a new appreciation for the sublime in the ridiculous. After watching it, you may find yourself feeling like Waters did after getting pelted with carryout wrappings thrown from a passing car on the streets of his hometown, as recounted in his first memoir. "Shock Value" (1981): "I realized I was a very lucky man to be able to live in Baltimore and experience firsthand all those beautiful moments of truth."

"Pink Flamingos" was added to the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 2021.

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